

DECONSTRUCTING DHARMA: GENDER POWER AND THE MANUSMRITI

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Abstract

The Manusmriti is one of the most important Hindu legal and ethical texts, traditionally attributed to the sage Manu. It is a part of Dharmashastra literature and has had a profound influence on Hindu law, social norms, and religious thought across centuries. It addresses all aspects of human life from cosmogony and moral philosophy to legal and social regulations. Manusmriti's depiction of women showcases them as libidinous creatures, who need to be kept under control by the male authoritative figures in their lives. Feminist analyses argue that Manusmriti institutionalized gender inequality, shaping social customs that marginalized women for centuries. Manusmriti presents a hierarchical worldview in which, women must remain under male guardianship throughout life.

Keywords: *Manu Smriti, Hindu law, Social norms, Feminism, Gender inequality*

Introduction

The Manu-smriti is one of the most important and authoritative legal texts followed in Hinduism. It is also widely

known as Manav Dharma Sastra or The Laws of Manu. The text is said to be written by the first law-giver, Manu, in Sanskrit language. The Manusmriti is also known as Manava-Dharmaśāstra or The Laws

of Manu. It is one of the most important Hindu legal and ethical texts, traditionally attributed to the sage Manu. It forms part of the Dharmashastra literature and has had a profound influence on Hindu law, social norms, and religious thought across centuries. Compiled around the Second century BCE to Second century CE, the Manusmriti consists of twelve chapters and approximately 2,684 verses written in Sanskrit. It addresses all aspects of human life from cosmogony and moral philosophy to legal and social regulations.

Its chapters cover duties of the four social classes (varna), the four stages of life (ashrama), sacraments, education, marriage, laws of inheritance, and governance. The text supports a hierarchical social order based on the varna (caste) system, prescribing detailed duties for Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (servants).

Manu Smriti has been criticized for its endorsement of caste distinctions and for passages that place women in a subordinate position relative to men, requiring them to be under the guardianship of fathers, husbands, or sons. Such aspects have drawn intense modern criticism and debate regarding equality and human rights. Historically, Manusmriti influenced Hindu law codes and social practices. However, its authority has not been uniform across time. Many Social reformers, such as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotiashiro Phule and Periyar E.V.R strongly opposed it for legitimizing caste discrimination. Some

Hindu traditions hold that Manusmriti is not applicable in the current age, that is Kali Yuga.

Manusmriti as a Patriarchal Text

The Manusmriti has been widely criticized for its patriarchal and discriminatory portrayal of women. While it does contain some verses advocating respect for women, much of the text reflects an ideology that subordinates women to men in every stage of life and restricts their autonomy. The Manusmriti explicitly states that a woman must always remain under male guardianship, her father when a girl, her husband when married, and her sons in widowhood. Verse 9.3 says: "Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons guard her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence." This language institutionalizes lifelong male control over women. Denial of Autonomy and Rights of Women in Manusmriti are denied independent access to education, legal autonomy, and religious life. Verse 9.18 states that women have no dealings with sacred texts, a reflection of the notion that they are unfit for spiritual and scholarly pursuits. Similarly, women cannot serve as witnesses in court because they are considered 'untrustworthy by nature.' The text defines their primary role as serving their husbands and producing offspring.

Objectification and Sexual Control

The text uses metaphors that objectify women as property or fields for male 'seeds.' In verse 33.9, a woman is described as 'the field' while the man is 'the seed,' suggesting that her role is

mainly reproductive. Other passages present women as inherently lustful and untrustworthy (9.14–16), asserting the need for constant vigilance by men to prevent moral corruption. The underlying assumption is that women's sexuality must be controlled for social order and lineage purity.

Unequal Moral Standards

According to Manusmriti, adultery by women warranted severe punishment, public humiliation or even death, while men faced lighter consequences. A husband's authority was absolute: a 'good woman' was expected to obey and revere her husband regardless of his moral character, even if he was 'addicted to evil passions'. Prohibition of Remarriage and Freedom. The text allows men to remarry but forbids women from doing so under any circumstances, declaring that a widow must never mention another man's name. Even if abandoned or widowed, she is to remain loyal to her husband's memory for life. This system reinforced social and economic dependence on male relatives. Modern scholars and reformers view these doctrines as reflections of the patriarchal structures of ancient society. Feminists argue that Manusmriti institutionalized gender inequality, shaping social customs that marginalized women for centuries. Reformers like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar publicly denounced the text, burning copies of it in protest against its anti-women and casteist ideology.

In essence, Manusmriti portrays women not as independent individuals but as dependents and subjects of male authority. Its legacy in reinforcing gender hierarchy remains one of the most

controversial aspects of Hindu social history. Women are portrayed as sexually promiscuous, secret, sly, and out to capture men. Their bodies are frequently objectified and more often devalued as eliciting disgust.

-[67:2]The ritual of marriage is traditionally known as the Vedic transformative ritual for women; serving her husband is (the equivalent of) living with a guru, and household chores are the rites of the fire.

According to Nazeera & Kuruvilla, sexuality became the primary site for control of women through Manu. In Manu, women are described as sexually promiscuous, sly, wicked, secretive, and out to hunt and capture men. They are objectified and their bodies are sexualised. Manusmriti's depiction of women showcases them as libidinous creatures, who need to be kept under control by the male authoritative figures in their lives - father and husband. Their fundamental essence was that of high libido and uncontrolled and troubling carnal needs.

-[213:2]It is the very nature of women to corrupt men here on earth; for that reason, circumspect men do not get careless and wanton among wanton women.

Women are perilous, according to Manu, because even a respectable man may lose his honor in their presence. He claims that even a scholarly man, such as a priest, should exercise caution and vigilance when around women. Manu views women as sexualized objects and frequently as objects of pleasure,

particularly for men from higher castes. Manu suggests avoiding meetings at all costs because, in his opinion, women are only interested in seduction and a decent man could easily lose his honor due to their strong sexual cravings.

-[215:2]No one should sit in a deserted place with his mother, sister, or daughter; for the strong cluster of the sensory powers drags away even a learned man.

A woman has little control over her life and is expected to comply with all of her husband's orders. She must always be faithful to her husband and comply with all of his requests without raising an objection. A good wife serves and worships her husband like God, is quiet, and modest. The way a wife acts toward her husband is independent of how the husband acts toward her; a good wife must uphold her responsibilities even if the husband is violent, abusive, freely indulges his lust, and lacks any virtues. She is not allowed to criticize her husband or point out his errors.

Manusmriti's depiction of women has drawn harsh criticism. Every facet of a woman's life—economic, social, political, and sexual—is attempted to be restricted. Manusmriti is the pinnacle of patriarchal society and injustice. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar notes that Manusmriti has drawn harsh criticism for its discriminating and misogynistic viewpoints.

The view of the women was both an insult and an injury to the women of India. It was an injury because, without any justification, she was denied the right to acquire knowledge which is the birthright

of every human being. It was an insult because after denying her the opportunity to acquire knowledge, she was declared to be as unclean as untruth for want of knowledge and therefore not allowed to take sanyas, which was regarded as a path to reach Brahma. (as cited in Rege, 2013, p.121).

Manusmriti promotes child marriage by advocating for young girls to be married off. By asserting that a wife must treat her husband like God even if he lacks any divine attributes, it encourages harsh and violent partnerships. It confines women to a life of slavery and robs them of their agency. In summary, it causes them to be mistreated, oppressed, and deprived of their dignity. It argues that the wife must satisfy all of her husband's wants and requirements, which is a case for marital rape. In addition to portraying women as sex objects, particularly for men from higher castes, it simultaneously encourages sexual aggression against women and the caste system while attempting to stifle their sexuality.

Manusmriti accuses women of being seducers, making them accountable for any wrong inflicted upon them. In any instance of physical or sexual aggression, the victim is held accountable. Abortion rights and women's freedom of speech are expressly forbidden under Manusmriti. It becomes culturally acceptable to govern women based on such dictums. Manusmriti seems to make a judgment about women without considering alternative strategies or the advantages of empowering women. Because the majority of Manu-smriti's teachings are

out of step with contemporary culture, it is deemed irrelevant in today's world. After Sir William Jones translated the text, it became a highly significant topic during British colonial control in India from Sanskrit and utilized it to create a Hindu common law. Many people characterize it as an attempt by the British to carry out their divide and conquer policy by targeting Indians' religious beliefs.

Manusmriti presents a hierarchical worldview in which, women must remain under male guardianship throughout life. Caste determines moral worth, occupation, and social rights. Social order is maintained through strict purity-pollution rules. In contrast, the Indian Constitution, shaped by Ambedkar's anti-caste vision, enshrines, Equality before law (Article 14), Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex, caste, or religion (Article 15), Freedom and dignity for all individuals (Articles 19 & 21).

Periyar insisted on total dismantling of patriarchal scriptures like Manusmriti, not mere reform. He placed caste at the centre of women's oppression, arguing that gender inequality in India cannot be separated from Brahminical dominance. He promoted self-respect marriage, widow remarriage, birth control, and women's sexual autonomy issues even mainstream feminists were hesitant to foreground. He criticized religious institutions, gods, rituals, and priesthood as tools of women's subordination. Caste purity is maintained by controlling women's sexuality. Brahmin male authority is upheld through rituals, laws, and social norms.

Conclusion

Religious texts like Manusmriti

legitimize both women's subordination and caste hierarchy. In contrast, Ambedkar and Periyar, through rationalist and anti-caste philosophies, argued for, the complete annihilation of caste-based hierarchy. Equality rooted not in tradition but in individual dignity and scientific reasoning. Liberation of women as essential for dismantling caste. The rejection of religious authority over personal rights. Ambedkar criticised Manusmriti for institutionalising caste and patriarchal injustice. Periyar went further, calling for its outright destruction as a symbolic act against Brahminical domination through Manusmriti. Together, their rationalist frameworks promote a society based on equal rights, freedom of choice, social justice, secular and scientific ethics.

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Author's Note

I am Mrs. K. Bhavadharini, M.A., M.Phil., (English), currently pursuing my Ph.D., as an Internal Part-time Research Scholar at Periyar Maniyammai Institute of Science and Technology, while serving as Assistant Professor in the Department of Languages. My lifelong thirst for literature has shaped both my academic journey and my creative pursuits. I am deeply passionate about poetry writing, playing the veena, and singing Carnatic music. I am highly concerned about Ecology and Sustainable living.

My concern for society made me choose this area as the focus of my research paper. The reforms and ideals of Thanthai Periyar and Aasiriyar K.Veeramani Ayya have profoundly influenced my thinking, inspiring me to question oppressive traditions and envision a more enlightened society. With the guidance and encouragement of my Research Supervisor, Dr. B. R. Veeramani, I have written this article with the hope of lifting women from darkness into light.

Even today, many remain bound by superstitious beliefs rooted in Manusmriti. It is time to rise above such oppressions, to think critically, and to embrace liberation. My work is a humble contribution toward that awakening.

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He has authored thirty-two international research papers and edited nine books, contributing significantly to the discourse on literature and cultural transformation. Ten scholars have completed their Ph.D., under his guidance, and ten more are currently pursuing research under his mentorship.

He is widely recognized for his interdisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with philosophical and cultural inquiry. His work continues to inspire critical engagement and academic excellence across institutions.

